

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

NCAC URGES CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS NOT TO ABANDON KEHINDE WILEY EXHIBITIONS IN FACE OF ALLEGATIONS

As an organization committed to protecting the freedom of thought, expression, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship is alarmed by the decisions of three U.S. museums—the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, and the Joslyn Art Museum—to cancel or postpone plans to exhibit artwork by Kehinde Wiley. In recent weeks, Wiley has been the subject of growing accusations of sexual misconduct, though he denies the claims made by his accusers.

Kehinde Wiley is an artist known for his large-scale, ornate paintings and sculptures of Black subjects styled in the traditions of European and American portraiture. An awardee of the National Medal of Arts in 2015 and Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People of 2018 amongst others, Wiley’s visibility skyrocketed following his 2018 commission to paint the portrait of former U.S. President Barack Obama. His works are celebrated for the ways in which they challenge societal interpretations of racial minorities and interrogate legacies of power.

The allegations against Wiley are serious and concerning, and his stature as an artist would in no way excuse any such alleged behaviors or lessen their impacts. But the response of cultural institutions—to immediately rescind plans to exhibit the artist’s works—does a disservice to the audiences who wish to experience the work of one of the nation’s most well-recognized artists. The response also establishes an implied practice of scrutinizing the personal conduct of *all* exhibiting artists, and risks an ad hoc application of unstated policy.

Museums are not equipped or mandated to be enforcers of moral orthodoxy. Their shared role is to identify and contextualize works that have artistic merit and cultural relevance. Museums are, or at least should be, equipped to host exhibitions that probe the complexity of given artworks at the time in which they are presented, and host important discussions about ethical conflicts, should the need for them arise.

In addition to being unqualified as moral arbiters, museums risk a dramatic reduction in the complexity and quantity of art eligible for exhibition when they apply a moral litmus test to artists. Indeed, artists, even great artists, have exhibited moral flaws: Caravaggio was a murderer, Picasso was emotionally and sexually abusive, TS Eliot and Virginia Woolf were antisemites, David Bowie allegedly had sex with minors, and Nina Simone’s own daughter alleged she was abusive. And yet they each have contributed works of art and cultural significance that inspire and move audiences across generations.

The National Coalition Against Censorship urges the leadership of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, and the Joslyn Art Museum to resume their respective plans to display works of Kehinde Wiley, while acknowledging the allegations. We also urge the

Museums to adopt clear free speech guidelines for future exhibitions. Any such guidelines should align with their institutional missions, uphold artistic freedom, and demonstrate respect for the critical capacities of the audiences they serve.

—

National Coalition Against Censorship

Since its inception in 1974, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has functioned as a first responder in protecting freedom of expression, a fundamental human right and a keystone of democracy. Representing 59 trusted education, publishing, and arts organizations, NCAC encourages and facilitates dialogue between diverse voices and perspectives, including those that have historically been silenced.